



Martz makes silver bullet status official

By KATHLEEN McLAUGHLIN
Missoulian State Bureau

HELENA - Gov. Judy Martz has officially asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to add Libby's asbestos contamination to the nation's most-contaminated cleanup sites list and marked Libby as the state's highest priority.

"The Libby Asbestos Site presents the greatest danger to public health or welfare or the environment of the known Superfund facilities in Montana," Martz wrote in a letter sent Monday to EPA regional officials in Denver.

In her letter, Martz notes the tie between widespread illness and death in Libby to the former vermiculite mining operations of W.R. Grace and Co., from the mine's decades-long release of toxic asbestos into the area.

"Therefore, I am hereby designating the site as the highest priority release site in Montana and request that the site be placed on the National Priorities List as soon as possible," Martz wrote.

See **MARTZ**, Page A9

MISSOULIAN

MISSOULA, MT 59807

DAILY, 31,217 SUN. 38,397

JAN 16 2002

SUPERIOR CLIPPING SERVICE
GLENDALE, MT 406-363-6612

Martz

Continued

The letter represented Martz's pre-Christmas commitment to Libby residents that she would fire Montana's lone "silver bullet" with the EPA for a speeded Superfund listing process for the asbestos cleanup in the area. Her decision to use the state's lone fast-tracking authority came after months of debate over the issue.

This summer, Martz criticized the Superfund program and said she thought W.R. Grace and Co. ought to be given a chance to clean up the mess. Critics, including state Attorney General Mike McGrath, said that notion would never work, since the company declared bankruptcy earlier this year.

Then, in a meeting last fall with

the Lincoln County Commission, Martz refused to use the "silver bullet" option, saying she feared a terrorist attack on Montana could create an environmental catastrophe greater than Libby's.

But in the end, the governor was convinced that asbestos contamination in the Libby area is Montana's worst environmental problem and demands quick remedy. The EPA has been working in Libby to stem the contamination for nearly two years, since national news stories linked nearly 200 deaths to the mine, which closed in 1990. In the first two years, the EPA has spent an estimated \$32 million testing areas and removing contaminated soils and mine wastes that present health risks.

EPA officials have pushed for a Superfund listing to guarantee long-term cleanup. Martz's letter on Wednesday begins the listing

process, which will take several more months.

In the meantime, the governor is asking that the EPA continue to foot the bill for ongoing work in Libby. Among her other conditions, Martz is asking federal officials to employ local workers as much as possible, hold innocent homeowners and business harmless for cleanup costs, and primarily, make sure the process is speedy.

"I am particularly concerned about the amount of time Superfund takes and any perceived stigma potentially affecting real estate and financial transactions as a result of NPL listing," wrote Martz.

The EPA has already agreed to Martz's conditions. Officials have said they believe cleanup of the town will take no more than three years, although maintenance of the mine site is apt to be ongoing.